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Historical Incidents

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HISTORICAL INCIDENTS.

What "Our Women in the War"
Did and Suffered

By MRS. F. C. ROBERTS.

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HISTORICAL INCIDENTS

What "Our Women in the War" Did and Suffered.

THE LIFE OF A REFUGEE.

Before attempting to write the life of a refugee it is necessary to touch briefly on the causes that led to that life. Naturally, women clung to their homes, naturally they would shrink from giving up their comforts and luxuries for a life of trial and hardship. The women of New Bern were compelled to do so. Situated on broad rivers, that afforded easy access to gunboats, Burnside selected this as early as March, 1862, as a strategic point, easy to capture, easy to hold, and affording pleasant and comfortable quarters for his army. In those days the country was in a state of intense excitement; all the young men had enlisted for the war, leaving only such as were incapacitated by age or infirmities, to constitute the "Home Guard" and to defend the town in case of an attack. These old men were called on to throw up breastworks. Being too feeble to shoulder a musket, they were constrained to handle a spade. Slight as our defenses were, we had an abiding faith that the justice and sanctity of our cause would be our safeguard. The women were not idle, all were busy making clothes, or knitting socks, or making cartridges and flags. All were ready to sacrifice their homes and their dear ones for their loved Southland. Early in September, 1861, Hatteras fell. Fort Macon followed. We

were now reduced to our local defenses. Besides the breastworks on land, obstructions and torpedoes were sunk in our rivers. We had not long to wait. On the 15th of March, 1862, Burnside began his attack. Confederate troops were sent to meet him, and might have succeeded in driving him off, but there were traitors among us. His gunboats were piloted safely around the obstructions. It was even said that our guns on land were so mounted as to be worse than useless. Our men fought bravely, but against two great odds. It is impossible to convey any idea of the horrors of a battle to those who have never been near enough to hear the guns. All day the battle raged. It was reported that the very last train would leave for Goldsboro at 11 a. m. This was to convey the sick and wounded from the hospitals to a place of safety. Women and children hastened to the depot. No train came. All day long and until 11 at night they waited. Little children cried from hunger and women sat with pale fixed faces, listening to the heavy, deep sound of cannon and the sharp rattle of muskets. Perhaps it is harder to sit inactive and know that our loved ones are in eminent peril than to face danger. Our husbands and brothers were under fire, and every report seemed to rend one's heart-strings. At 11 p. m. the long-expected train came. The night was dark and there was a heavy rain storm. The cars were soon crowded to suffocation by the sick and wounded from the hospitals, and such refugees as could find standing room. With little frightened children clinging to them, and with only such baggage as could be taken in their hands, these heroic women began their strange lives. At the first station, then called "Moseley

Hall," I got out to wait for the fighting to cease that I might return to my home. I little thought how many years it would be before I saw that home again. I stood with my babies and their nurses in the pouring rain till all were dripping wet. A kind Samaritan offered us shelter for the night. We wrapped our little ones in blankets and hung their clothes to the fire to dry. The bag containing a change of clothes was also wet through.

On the 16th, Burnside entered the town. A train ventured down to remove our retreating army; this was shelled. Our men in retreating set fire to the town in many places. Ladies stood on the streets with food and water for our famished men. It was reported that some of these men were killed when the enemy's guns were turned on the town. A friend (Dr. C. F. Deems) met us (my sister, Miss H. G. Cole, and me at Moseley Hall and offered to take us to his house in Wilson for a few days, till we could make other arrangements; we gladly accepted. Some trunks of clothing and some boxes of bedding had been sent to Goldsboro some days before; these we collected and took with us. I was glad to wait for a short time before moving on. My husband, adjutant of a regiment, was in the fight and had not been heard from. We were offered an asylum with relatives in South Carolina. We packed up and went to the depot, only to be informed that the trains were moving troops, and passengers were not allowed. Poor refugees! deprived of homes and home comforts, there seemed no resting place for them! Our friends were most kind, but we felt how inconvenient it was for them to keep us. We were compelled to remain. The oldest boy of the family

was teaching. He was anxious to enlist, and I offered to take his school till a teacher could be found. I have been face to face with a part of Sherman's army, and not a nerve was shaken, but when I confronted this room full of grown boys my heart sank. They were gentlemen and gave me no trouble. The poor boy, Theodore Deems, who had enlisted, fell in his first battle. From the school-house I was called to the sick-room. My little children had been exposed on the cars to all sorts of diseases. One after another developed, and for weeks they were at death's door. We found a vacant house in Louisberg. The farm was rented by a "free man of color"—but the house, reported to be haunted, was vacant. Collecting our belongings, we packed them in one wagon and our convalescent children in another, bade farewell to our kind friends, and in true immigrant style began our journey across the country. The first wagon went through safely. The second broke down. Our driver rode into town for relief. Night came on, and I sat on the roadside and made a wide lap and held all the children for some hours. At midnight we reached our home. We had no matches, and we simply waited for daylight. We were getting used to waiting. With daylight came a most welcome and unexpected invitation to breakfast from our co-renters. Such a delicious breakfast as we had! Though we left silver on the table, we have been paying for that breakfast 40 years. The debt is not yet cancelled, for Aunt Sallie still lives. Busy days followed. We had to furnish our house. We had bunks made of rough planks for our feather beds. Think of the comforts of feather beds in the summer! We were refugees, and our bunks

were hard! Our boxes were converted into lounges and tables and bureaus and washstands. All were draped and upholstered with homespun. We bought six chairs. And after Mrs. Johnson presented us with a carpet and a pair of andirons for the nursery, we felt as rich as Cræsus. Our life in Louisburg was a very happy one. From our neighbors we received unflagging acts of kindness. We had no horse, but we drove to church every Sunday. We kept no cows, but our children always had milk. We had no gardens, but our table was supplied with vegetables. My children have been taught to venerate the names of Hawkins, Hill, Malone, Williams, Lewis, Johnson, Eaton, Jones and others. None are forgotten. We had only to say our prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," and it came. Sometimes we were a little extravagant. A gentlemen dined with us and we had our two days' dinner in one day. Meat and greens and apple dumplings. The next day we fasted. Such extravagance deserved punishment. In spite of some cares and privations and anxieties about our loved ones fighting in Virginia, I look back, after 40 years, on my life in Louisburg as a bright spot in memory. The enemy was advancing on Mobile, getting between us and our Alabama plantation. Feeling that our servants would need our care and protection, we decided to bring in those who wished to come. We bought a small farm in Warren county, near the Virginia line. After an affectionate farewell to our many friends, we tied our precious feather beds in sheets, packed our new possessions in trunks, and taking our six chairs, left our "furniture" behind. Again we engaged two wagons. One came. This we filled with our goods. The overflow was left for the

second wagon. The five servants went. The two little boys begged to be allowed to ride on the trunks with Allen and Sam. As their black mamies were with them, and as we expected to follow immediately, we consented. All day long we waited at the door with our belongings tied up in our usual emigrant style, but no wagon came. We unpacked, put our babies to bed, built a fire and made biscuits, which we baked in the spider, and coffee, which we boiled in the coffee pot. Heavy rains came on. The roads became impassable. For a week we camped, we cooked and nursed, and "waited for the wagon." Our kind friend, Mr. Jones, came to relieve our minds of anxiety about our little boys. They were the only children of a widowed sister, entrusted to our care. He had them at his house and he invited us to go home with him for a few days. We gladly accepted his invitation. Our visit was a delightful one. It was soon after Annie Lee's death. We visited her newly-made grave. Our first impressions of our new home, "Forest Cottage," were not very favorable. We found everything in a dilapidated condition. My husband had come home, as we thought, to die with consumption. He could no longer ride his horse or stand a day's march. He converted his gun into a plowshare and his sword into a pruning hook. We were ignorant of country life. In Warren the public sentiment was against refugees. We were unfortunate. Our cattle died, our hogs strayed off, our poultry was stolen. Provisions were not plentiful. Our neighbors refused to sell to us for our negroes on the ground that they had not enough for themselves. We were not discouraged, for we were confident if we could tide over the first year our little farm would

support us. Finding the servants dissatisfied with my manner of dealing out the meat, I called them together and divided all there was among them, according to the size of their families. I told them that with economy it would last till our hogs were fattened and our beeves ready to kill. I left none for ourselves. We lived on peas boiled without meat. To this day I loathe the smell and taste of peas. In six weeks I ate nothing but berries. These were more to my taste than corn bread, peas and rye coffee; my poultry consisted of an old drake, a great grandfather. A friend (Dr. Deemes) came to dine. Taking the children aside, I said to them, "The old drake will be killed to-day; you must not say one word about it at the table." But when the savory smell came up the stairs it was too much for the small boy. He sprang up, clapping his hands, and called out, "There comes the old drake." It was very tough eating. Our life on the farm was a very happy and a very busy one. We hired all the men out but just enough to cultivate our fields, and to do odd jobs around the house. I trained the young women as house servants, cooks and nurses, and found homes for them. We planted sorghum and boiled our own syrup; we had a cider press, a tan vat and a loom made. Leather was tanned and wooden soles made on the place. We all had wooden bottomed shoes made out and out at home. I learned to weave, and before the year was out I had put on the warping bars, and woven 350 yards of cloth. We planted indigo and made blue die. From sumack berries we got a good black die, and from walnut hulls pretty brown. Thus I varied my stripes and plaids. Our life was not entirely without excitement. Among the little negroes there were 30 cases of

measles, followed by as many of whooping cough. These I tended myself as we had no physician near us. One servant was bitten by a mad-dog. One of our children, thinking he saw a terrapin on a hen's nest, reached out for it, and was bitten by a high-land moccasin. One little girl was caught on the horns of a cow and tossed in the air. Another child fell in the fire and was badly burned. And then, when fishing with a hair-pin in the tan vat, one fell in and narrowly escaped being drowned. It taxed our ingenuity to meet the demands of Christmas. By cutting paper dogs, horses, cows and birds and laying on cake made with sorghum, we had quite a fine display. Home-made candy and groundpeas served to fill their stockings. Rag dolls and home-made toys delighted their hearts. On Christmas morning the little ones went from cabin to cabin with a simple gift for each child on the farm. Our Christmas cake was made of dried cherries, dried whortle berries and watermelon rind for fruit. We had lemonade, made with citric acid and essence of lemon. My brother brought the Rev. Dr. Patterson to spend this Christmas with us. I had my little boy and 30 little negroes baptized. My little Jimmie was just 11 days old. The most remarkable thing about our establishment was our turnout. The mules were not well matched, Big Jim would have made two of his companion. Our carriage was a second edition of the "one-horse shay." We drove into Warrenton every Sunday to church. At the foot of every hill carriage and harness literally dropped to pieces and had to be tied together with straps and strings. Cato was ashamed to be seen driving such an equipment. He insisted that we should get out at the edge of town and walk to church. I had one

dress and one hat for two children. One Sunday the little boy wore them to church and the next Sunday they were worn by the little girl. The last year of the War we were more comfortable. Just as we were beginning to live in some comfort the end came.

One day a party of poor, ragged, depressed looking men in gray straggled in. On taking them into the parlor they saw my husband. They were his men; he was their captain. The meeting was a touching one. With tears streaming down their faces they said, "Captain, we are all that are left." They gave me their tent, saying, "This is all we have to offer." Taking out a crumpled paper, they handed it to their captain asking him to read it. It was an account of Lee's surrender. They bowed their heads in their hands, and we all wept. To them and to us this seemed the end of all things. Still living in dread of Sherman, we hid and buried our treasures. I called the servants together and mounting the fence I made my first and last stump speech. I spoke to them kindly, reminding them of the close tie that had bound us together for 200 years, of how faithfully we had always performed our duty towards them, and of how they, too, had always been faithful. I told them the tie was broken, we had no longer any claim on them, and that at that moment they were free to leave. They seemed deeply affected and their spokesman asked for time to think. The next morning they called us out. Moses, speaking for all, said they wished no change for the year, and when the time was out would we be their friends and advise them what to do. By referring to a journal kept at that time I find that when my husband was away from home I took my children out in the fields and

superintended the men, and that I gave my personal attention to all the work of the farm. I remember how I enjoyed it. Not many days after this, just after Johnson's surrender, suddenly our fences were torn down and from all quarters men in blue coats, on horses and on foot, poured in on us. Our place was alive with them. I was standing at my garden gate holding my little child's hand. Two men dashed up to me so close that I felt the breath of their horses in my face. I felt no fear of them. Calmly I looked one after another from head to foot. Silently they turned and rode off. No recollection of the past comes to me so vividly as that of Sherman's invasion. I seemed to see the grove alive with blue uniforms. I see my poor husband, helpless, hopeless, seated on a stump with a group around him calling him "old man," and boasting of the dreadful acts of vandalism they had committed, and demanding food for man and beast. I seem to hear my husband calling to the servants to show "these men" around the place; they found the hen-house, the barns, the smoke-houses, the store-rooms all empty. Even "Big Jim" was missing. After eating the bark off of the inside of his stall he had become discouraged and had wandered off into the woods and died. The crows that came to feast on him flew away hungry. Finding nothing to steal, the Federal soldiers for once were honest. They took nothing. Had they lifted my baby from her rough homemade cradle or peeped into rat holes, or dug in the mustard bed, they would not have gone off empty-handed. Our wealthy neighbors did not escape so easily. The long line of empty carriages, the droves of cattle and of living things, proved that the war was over. Sherman meant to finish his work. His

men had been too well drilled in committing depredations to leave off, simply because Lee and Johnson had surrendered.

We remained on our farm till fall. Then we sold out such things as we had collected. We had just enough to pay our expenses to New Bern. I do not use the word home, I had no such place. My home was in ashes. The war was over. The reign of terror began. The heaviest trials, the darkest days of my life opened before me. They do not belong to this story. I have tried to tell something of the life of a refugee. The excitement, the novelty, the many expedients resorted to made it full of interest. In my old age it is the period of my past I love to recall. I seem to remember all the pleasant things. And if there were any disagreeables they are forgotten. Our friends were kind, our children were happy in the freedom of their country home. I was lifted above the petty cares of life by an enthusiastic love of country. As I could not serve, I could suffer and wait. I feel I have failed in conveying a true idea of the life of a refugee. I have done my best. Pardon the length of this article.

I must write one incident of my life of a refugee. Our friend and neighbor, Mrs. Tom Carroll, invited us to dinner; we had just seated ourselves at the table, had just inhaled with a long-drawn breath the delicious odor that filled the room. Our plates had just been filled. I had taken part of everything on the table, ham, pig, turkey, vegetables of all kinds, and every variety of condiment. I had feasted my eyes and raised my knife and fork to enjoy this wonderful dinner, when looking across the table I saw my husband had fainted. With a lingering, longing look behind, I left the table to

perform my wifely duty. The faint was a long one; he said it was caused by the surprise of ham meeting turkey, and both such strangers. When I returned to the dining room dinner was over. My hostess fared sumptuously every day; had she ever known hunger she would have put my plate aside; instead, she handed me a plate of pickles, saying, "We always eat pickles after ice cream." Ice cream! Insult to injury! The loss of that dinner haunted my waking hours for many a month, and that ice cream became a night-mare that banished sleep.

The last of the crushed, disappointed and disheartened men who returned to us was my brother, Major Hugh Cole. At the very beginning of the war he had marched off to Virginia at the head of a gallant company. Returned alone; he had been one of those who had constituted Mr. Davis' body guard, had been at the last cabinet meeting, and when his beloved President was captured he had ridden off to join the "last man and the last dollar" patriots across the mountain. He brought with him a valuable souvenir. Mr. Davis, in parting with his officers, devided among them a little gold he had with him. My brother devided his share (\$30) among the children of the family, giving each one a little gold dollar. This they prize more than any of their possessions. Not enough has been written on the faithfulness and devotion of the negroes of the South during the war. I collected them on Sunday evenings and taught them. Our children taught them to read and write. And we had the church service and a sermon for the older ones on Sundays. Their affection and devotion to me and my little ones was beautiful. How often have I stood at my nursery

door and listened to Uncle Remus and the little boy. This is what I saw. A big fire of logs. In one corner dear old Mammy with her spotless turban and apron, with her baby in her arms, Uncle Remus and the little boy in front of the fire. These two, Mammy and Uncle John, occupying the only chairs, on a row of soap boxes—the other nurses with the little white faces pressed against the black ones, the little white baby arms around black necks, and on each side of Uncle Remus (John) the two larger boys, and at his feet his own grandchildren. All listening to “Brer Rabbit” stories. But when it came to the “Tar baby” mammy must tell that. No one else could do it justice. Mammy ruled supreme in the nursery, all had to obey her. The rest of the house was mine, but the nursery was hers. The close friendship between Uncle Remus and the little boy (Uncle John and little Marse Jack) was very beautiful. If Uncle John split rails, Marse Jack, three years old, had his wedges and mallets and split rails too. If Uncle John ploughed, Marse Jack held the reins. When an uncle came home wounded Uncle John made the crutches that Marse Jack walked on till the wounded uncle threw his aside. And none grieved more sincerely than Uncle John when little Marse Jack fell asleep. In a strange land, deprived of their comforts and luxuries, having barely enough to eat, these negroes served my husband and myself as cheerfully and as uncomplainingly as though they had never left their homes. Often I was alone on the farm with them and I felt perfectly safe and secure. I knew they would take care of me and mine.

MRS. F. C. ROBERTS,
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